Clement of Rome (1 Clement)

Author

The Greek and Latin manuscripts both title this letter, “The Letter of Clement to the Corinthians.” Even though his name nowhere appears in the letter, tradition ascribes Clement of Rome as the author. Jefford writes, “Both the late second-century bishop Irenaeus (of Lyons) and Eusebius of Caesarea believed that Clement was the third bishop of Rome.”

Was this written by a single author? Some historians argue that the author is **Titus Flavius Clemens** who was the cousin of Domitian and lived near the end of the first century. Domitian gave Clemens his niece in marriage and made him an heir to the Roman Empire. However, Clemens later refused to worship the gods of Rome, which “may imply that he elected to follow the God of the Christians. Clemens was eventually executed by the state for atheism [i.e. denial of the gods].” The only reason for connecting this figure (Titus Flavius Clemens) with the author of 1 Clement is the similarity of his name (Clemens) and his prayer for those in authority (60.4-61.2). This evidence, in other words, is weak.

Other scholars have argued that this Clement of Rome was **the same man mentioned in Philippians**. Paul writes, “I ask you also to help these women who have shared my struggle in the cause of the gospel, **together with Clement** also and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life” (Phil. 4:3). If we date this letter under the Neronian persecution, it would make this view more plausible.

Was this written by multiple authors? Scholars have long noted that there wasn’t a single bishop in Rome at the beginning of the second century. Paul mentions no single bishop in his letter to the Romans (AD 56-57), and neither does Ignatius of Antioch (~AD 100) in his letter to Rome. The letter repeatedly uses the plural “we” or “us,” as well. Jefford writes, “In the Coptic editions of the letter the text concludes with the title ‘The Epistle of the Romans to the Corinthians,’ and again no specific author is mentioned.”

Date

This book is difficult to date. It was most likely written after some sort of persecution. It is written after some persecution in Rome—what Clement calls “the

sudden and successive calamitous events which have happened to ourselves" (ch. 1). Does this refer to the persecution under Nero (~AD 64)? Or does it refer to the persecution under Domitian (~AD 81)?

The earliest it can be written is ~AD 67. After all, the letter mentions the martyrdom of Paul and Peter under Nero. Nero committed suicide in AD 68, so he must have had the two apostles executed before this time.

Evidence for the early date under Nero. The author mentions the temple sacrifices and the Jewish priesthood: "Not in every place, brethren, are the **daily sacrifices offered**, or the **peace-offerings**, or the **sin-offerings** and the **trespass-offerings**, **but in Jerusalem only**. And even there they are not offered in any place, but only at **the altar before the temple**, that which is offered being first carefully examined by **the high priest** and the **ministers** already mentioned" (ch.41). It doesn't seem as though the Temple had fallen when this letter was composed. This would date the book sometime before AD 70. Unless, of course, news hadn't spread to Rome about the Jewish War. Remember, this was a time before the Internet and CNN. At the same time, it couldn't be dated too much later than AD 70.

One final point in support of the early date: the author "makes virtually no use of the New Testament Gospels," yet he quotes extensively from the NT epistles. It's odd that the author wouldn't mention the gospel of Mark, when this was supposedly written in Rome. This doesn't prove an early date, but lends support in favor of it.

Evidence for the early date under Domitian. Eusebius places Clement in Rome during this time. Furthermore, 1 Clement seems to state that the apostles are all gone, and the second generation leaders are also at the end of their lives (see ch.44).

The latest it can be written is ~AD 150. Some scholars believe that the "sudden and successive calamitous events" (ch. 1) might not refer to persecution at all. Perhaps, they argue, this just refers to generic difficulties in the Church at Rome. This would spoil any attempt to date the letter under either Nero or Domitian. However, since there is good evidence that Polycarp knew of the letter, it must have been written before AD 156.

Conclusion? Scholars remain undecided as to an exact date—though most date it anywhere from **AD 65-110**. Jefford concludes, "The majority of scholars argue

today that the letter was composed… during the reign of the emperor Domitian himself, though the prospect of an earlier persecution under Nero is certainly possible."

Manuscript evidence

Formerly, this letter was preserved "in a single manuscript only" in Codex Alexandrinus (5th c. AD). However, in 1873, an additional Greek text was discovered in the Codex Hierosolymitanus. Jefford writes, "This text contains our only complete Greek witness to the text of 1 Clement."

Key points from this letter

Clement of Rome writes to the church in Corinth to admonish them for division in their church. Apparently, "one or two persons" were "[engaging] in sedition against its presbyters." This is the major thrust of the letter, and a topic Clement returns to over and over. He cites from all over Scripture (both OT and NT) to admonish and correct this church.

The Church of Rome did not have authority over the church in Corinth. Roman Catholic theologians argue that the Church of Rome was a monarchical episcopate over the entire church on Earth. However, we don't see this in 1 Clement, which is our earliest extrabiblical source. Instead, this church has plural elders or "presbyters," instead of a single bishop or elder ("*presbyters* among you," ch.1, "engage in sedition against its presbyters," ch.47, "let the flock of Christ live on terms of peace with the presbyters set over it," ch.54, "submit yourselves to the presbyters," ch.57).

Election is mentioned a lot in this letter. Since the church in Rome had Paul's letter to the Romans (specifically Romans 9), Reformed theologians argue that the doctrine of "unconditional election" was already in view.

There is no mention of Peter being in Rome. Clement mentions Peter's martyrdom, but makes no mention of him leading this church. This is a conspicuous silence for Roman Catholic theologians who argue that Peter was the bishop of Rome.

Comments on 1 Clement

(Chapter 1) This was a persecuted church. The author refers "to the sudden and successive calamitous events which have happened."

The leaders of Corinth “consulted” with the leaders of Rome. They asked for help. Roman Catholic theologians believe that this is evidence of a monarchical church government based in Rome (hence the *Roman* Catholic Church). However, Jefford writes, “Because of their Roman heritage, the Corinthians were especially attached to the city of Rome. They looked toward Rome as a model and supported Roman government and the Roman way of life. It was only logical, therefore, that the Christians of Corinth would have turned to Rome for the answers to their questions.”

The church in Corinth was going through “sedition.” This would fit with Paul’s own statements about this church following leaders, rather than God (1 Cor. 1).

“[The Corinthian church was] obedient to those who had the rule over you, and giving all fitting honour to the presbyters among you.” The author doesn’t mention the church of Rome ruling over them, but their own presbyters.

(Chapter 2) He continues to praise the Corinthians.

(Chapter 3) The root of the Corinthians’ problem was pride and envy. This is what led to the division.

(Chapter 4) He cites a number of OT examples of how envy has been disastrous for the people of God (e.g. Abel, Joseph, Moses, David).

(Chapter 5) He turns to the modern examples of Peter and Paul’s martyrdoms.

Regarding **Peter**, the author writes, “When he had at length suffered **martyrdom**, [Peter] departed to the place of glory due to him.”

Regarding **Paul**, the author writes that he was “seven times thrown into captivity.” Of course, these aren’t recorded in the NT. He believes that Paul “preached to the extreme limit of the west [Spain? Rome?], and suffered **martyrdom** under the prefects.”

(Chapter 6) Martyrdom wasn’t reserved for the apostles. The author writes that there was a “great multitude… furnished us with a most excellent example.” He names two women (Danaids and Dircae) who were “persecuted after they had suffered terrible and unspeakable torments.”

(Chapter 7) He “admonishes” them, but doesn’t offer any sort of command. He even says that his admonition applies to his own church: “These things, beloved, we write to you, not merely to admonish you of your duty, but also to remind

ourselves.”

Instead of focusing on envy, he tells them to focus on their calling to reach the world for Christ.

(Chapter 8) He cites a number of biblical passages from the OT that explain God’s desire for his people to repent. This is to reinforce his admonition to the Corinthians.

(Chapter 9) He gives examples of OT saints for them to imitate.

(Chapter 10) Abraham’s faith is a model to imitate.

(Chapter 11) He offers the contrast between Lot and his wife.

(Chapter 12) He appeals to the faith of Rahab. He interprets the scarlet cord to be prophetic of Jesus’ sacrifice: “Thus they made it manifest that redemption should flow through the blood of the Lord to all them that believe and hope in God. [You] see, beloved, that there was not only faith, but prophecy, in this woman.” The translators note, “Others of the Fathers adopt the same allegorical interpretation, e.g., Justin Mar*., Dialogue with Trypho*, n. 111; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, iv. 20.”

(Chapter 13) He gives more biblical references to encourage humility in the Corinthian church.

(Chapter 14) He warns of the dangers of falling in with the ringleaders of this division.

(Chapter 15) He tells them to have their *words* match their *works*.

(Chapter 16) He appeals to Jesus’ humility, as a foundation for seeking humility in their division and conflict. He cites a lot from Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22.

(Chapter 17) He appeals to OT figures as models of humility.

(Chapter 18) He appeals to David as a model of humility, citing (almost?) the entirety of Psalm 51.

(Chapter 19) He urges them toward peace.

(Chapter 20) He makes a case from nature to argue for peace and unity. Since natural laws and bodies exist in harmony with each other, so should we, according to the author.

(Chapter 21) He encourages them to stop pleasing these divisive people in the church, and instead to please God.

God is omniscient: “Let us reflect how near He is, and that none of the thoughts or reasonings in which we engage are hid from Him.”

(Chapter 22) He argues that this division is sinful, quoting Psalm 34 extensively.

(Chapter 23) He ties his exhortations to the Second Coming of Christ.

(Chapter 24) He argues that the resurrection of believers is seen in nature. Just as the plants and seeds die, so too they will be raised to life.

(Chapter 25) He finds a comparison for the resurrection with the phoenix bird—a “mythical bird from ancient Egyptian folklore. According to the legend, the phoenix was a fantastic bird of fire that lived for a period of five hundred years, after which it built a tomb and died. From this tomb would arise a worm, a creature that fed on the carcass of the dead bird, sprouted wings, and then carried the bones of its parent to their eternal resting place at the Egyptian site of Heliopolis, which means ‘city of the sun.’ The new creature then would return to repeat the five-hundred-year cycle. Our author employs this story of the phoenix as a sign of the resurrection. Just as the seed dies and sprouts new life from the ground (see 24.4–5), so too was the phoenix thought to gain new life from the remains of its former existence. This imagery depicts the reality of the resurrection of Jesus and its testimony that life derives from death according to the order established by God.”

(Chapter 26) If we see resurrection in nature (ch.24) and the phoenix (ch.25), then why would we be surprised to see it in the physical body after death?

(Chapter 27) God cannot lie, and he is omniscient.

(Chapter 28) God is omniscient. Therefore, we shouldn’t live a double life.

(Chapter 29) Believers should not live double lives, but come to God with a clear conscience.

(Chapter 30) This statement could be misconstrued to state that he affirmed justification by works: “Let us clothe ourselves with concord and humility, ever exercising self-control, standing far off from all whispering and evil-speaking, being **justified by our works**, and not our words.” However, later, he is clear that justification is not by works, but by faith (ch.32).

The context for this statement from the author is that the seditious people in Corinth were double-minded and hypocritical. We can't see their justification by what they say, but by what they do. This would fit with our interpretation of **James 2:14-26**. This is justification before *men*—not before *God*. This would fit with his later statement: "Let testimony to our good deeds be borne by others." Justification before men is in view here, unless the author is contradicting himself in chapter 32. This fits with his statement in chapter 38: "Let the wise man **display his wisdom**, not by [mere] words, but through good deeds." He is concerned with how to show our justification.

(Chapter 31) How do you get God's blessing?

(Chapter 32) This statement from the church of Rome would later be anathematized by the Roman Catholic Church 1,500 years later: "We, too, being called by His will in Christ Jesus, are **not justified by ourselves**, nor by our own **wisdom**, or **understanding**, or **godliness**, or **works** which we have wrought in holiness of heart; **but by that faith** through which, from the beginning, Almighty God has justified all men; to whom be glory for ever and ever."

(Chapter 33) If we're justified by faith, should we not pursue good works? Of course not! Good works flow from our justification: "We see, then, how all righteous men have been adorned with good works, and how the Lord Himself, adorning Himself with His works, rejoiced. Having therefore such an example, let us without delay accede to His will, and let us work the work of righteousness with our whole strength." Since God is a worker of good works, we should be too.

(Chapter 34) Good works bring about eternal rewards.

(Chapter 35) He writes more about the promise of eternal rewards: "Let us therefore earnestly strive to be found in the number of those that wait for Him, in order that we may share in His promised gifts." He articulates how to get eternal rewards (e.g. faith, truth, following God's will, etc.).

(Chapter 36) Jesus is the giver of these gifts.

(Chapter 37) He compares the Christian community to soldiers in an army or to a physical body (1 Cor. 12; Rom. 12).

(Chapter 38) He teaches on humility.

(Chapter 39) He explains God's judgment for proud or envious people.

(Chapter 40) OT ritualism was already creeping into the early church: “He has enjoined **offerings [to be presented]** and **service to be performed [to Him],** and that not thoughtlessly or irregularly, but **at the appointed times and hours**. Where and by whom He desires these things to be done, He Himself has fixed by His own supreme will, in order that all things being piously done according to His good pleasure, may be acceptable unto Him. **Those, therefore, who present their offerings at the appointed times, are accepted and blessed**; for inasmuch as they follow the laws of the Lord, they sin not. For his own peculiar services are **assigned to the high priest**, and their own proper place is prescribed to the **priests**, and their own special ministrations devolve on the **Levites**. **The layman is bound by the laws that pertain to laymen.**”

(Chapter 41) How can this letter be written after the destruction of the Temple in AD 70 if he is referring to the Temple sacrifices and priesthood? The author writes, “Not in every place, brethren, are the daily sacrifices offered, or the peace-offerings, or the sin-offerings and the trespass-offerings, but in Jerusalem only. And even there they are not offered in any place, but only at the altar before the temple, that which is offered being first carefully examined by the high priest and the ministers already mentioned.”

(Chapter 42) The apostles set up “bishops” and “deacons” in the churches they planted.

(Chapter 43) He appeals to the budding staff of Aaron, and how God performed this miracle to affirm the leadership in Israel and prevent sedition or division.

(Chapter 44) The apostles were prepared for others to oversee the church when they were gone. The basis for recognizing leaders was:

Divine appointment. The early leaders were raised up by the apostles themselves, but this also included having “the consent of the *whole* Church.” This doesn’t sound like apostolic succession at all.

Having character. The author writes of men “who have blamelessly served the flock of Christ in a humble, peaceable, and disinterested spirit, and have for a long time possessed the good opinion of all.”

They couldn’t take these leaders out of their role if they were good leaders and served faithfully.

The author is not happy that the Corinthian church had removed good leaders from

their office: “We see that [you] have removed some men of excellent behaviour from the ministry, which they fulfilled blamelessly and with honour.”

(Chapter 45) The Corinthians were focusing on issues that weren’t essential.

The author held to a high view of Scripture: “Look carefully into the Scriptures, which are the true utterances of the Holy Spirit. Observe that nothing of an unjust or counterfeit character is written in them.”

He notes that good leaders were persecuted in the OT times, but only by wicked men. The implication is that the Corinthians were wicked toward their leaders.

(Chapter 46) He quotes Jesus’ words about Judas’ sedition and how false teachers stumble people’s faith. Their division was harming many people’s faith. He writes, “Your schism has subverted [the faith of] many, has discouraged many, has given rise to doubt in many, and has caused grief to us all. And still your sedition continues.”

(Chapter 47) He believed that Paul’s letter was written “under the inspiration of the Spirit.” He is angry that they are tolerating this sedition against the leadership of their church. He cites Paul’s letter to them (1 Corinthians) to reinforce his point about having a factious spirit.

(Chapter 48) He urges them to repent of this.

(Chapter 49) He appeals to the Christian understanding of love to stop their division (cf. 1 Cor. 13).

He teaches substitutionary atonement: “On account of the Love he bore us, Jesus Christ our Lord gave His blood for us by the will of God; His flesh for our flesh, and His soul for our souls.”

(Chapter 50) He makes more appeals to love in view of eternal life.

(Chapter 51) He calls on the divisive leaders to ask for forgiveness and repent.

(Chapter 52) God wants us to confess our sin and repent.

(Chapter 53) He appeals to Scripture as the basis of his authority in seeing them repent: “[You] understand, beloved, [you] understand well the Sacred Scriptures, and [you] have looked very earnestly into the oracles of God. Call then these things to your remembrance.”

He reminds them of how Moses interceded for the sinful nation in Exodus 32.

(Chapter 54) He tells the divisive leaders to be willing to leave the church if it's necessary to preserve the unity.

(Chapter 55) He cites numerous examples of people who were willing to lay down their lives in order to protect their loved ones. If the divisive leaders were truly loving toward the church, why wouldn't they be willing to do the same for the sake of unity in the church?

(Chapter 56) He encourages prayer for the divisive leaders. The believers should be willing to admonish these men too. Admonition is loving.

(Chapter 57) He calls on the seditious leaders to submit to the local elders of the church—not the church in Rome. He writes, "[You] therefore, who laid the foundation of this sedition, submit yourselves to the presbyters, and receive correction so as to repent, bending the knees of your hearts."

(Chapter 58) He emphasizes obedience to God, and refers to all three persons of the Trinity.

(Chapter 59) This was a persecuted church. They had people being imprisoned.

(Chapter 60) He affirms the sovereignty, omniscience, and omnipotence of God. Then he prays that the believers would be pleasing in the sight of "the rulers and governors" on Earth.

(Chapter 61) He prays that the rulers would rule well. He affirms God's sovereignty over them.

(Chapter 62) He knows that the Corinthians have searched the Scriptures for themselves.

(Chapter 63) The author doesn't threaten them with excommunication. He writes that their obedience would bring him great joy. He also sent older believers to help them out and witness what was happening.

(Chapter 64) He had a high view of God and Jesus.

(Chapter 65) Clement wanted them to write back to see if there was peace in this church. Notice that there isn't any sort of command authority in the Church of Rome at this time. It was far different from the Roman Catholic Church today.

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2. Jefford, C. N. (2012). *Reading the Apostolic Fathers: A Student's Introduction* (Second Edition, p. 107). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

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8. Jefford, C. N. (2012). *Reading the Apostolic Fathers: A Student's Introduction* (Second Edition, p. 104). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

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